

The Quest for the Meaning of Life

Ecclesiastes 1:12 I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.

¹³ And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.

¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

¹⁶ I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge."

¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

^{ESV} **Ecclesiastes 2:1** I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity.

² I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?"

³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine-- my heart still guiding me with wisdom-- and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.

⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.

⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.

⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.

⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.

⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.

¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.

¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.

¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.

¹⁴ The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.

¹⁵ Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.

¹⁶ For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!

¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me,

¹⁹ and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.

²⁰ So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,

²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.

²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?

²³ For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,

²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?

²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.

^{ESV} **Ecclesiastes 3:1** For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...

(Ecclesiastes 1:12-3:1)



The Meaning of Life

Man has been on a quest for [the meaning of life](#) forever. And there are many people who think they know it. I was surprised to find that there is a long Wikipedia page called

“**The Meaning of Life.**”¹ It is fairly exhaustive, taking us through scientific, philosophical, psychological, and religious perspectives that try to ground the question, to many specific examples of the same who have tried to sum it all up.

Plato believed the meaning of life was to attain to the highest form of knowledge, the Idea Form of the Good, from which all good and just things derive. **Aristotle** disagreed and said that seeking the Highest Good for its own sake was the meaning of life, and this was equivalent to happiness, well-being, flourishing, and excellence. This may be close to what **Thomas Jefferson** had in mind when talked about, “**Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.**” He wasn’t being a hedonist.

Nevertheless, a **hedonist** is someone who pursues bodily gratification and intense physical pleasure as the meaning and purpose of life. In the comic strip, Calvin once told Hobbes, “**Everybody seeks happiness! Not ME, though! That’s the difference between me and the rest of the world! Happiness isn’t good enough for me! I demand euphoria!**” This is a very selfish view of life’s purpose. Some forms of **transhumanism** are hedonistic, for its meaning of life is to

¹ “The Meaning of Life,” *Wikipedia*, last accessed May 31, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meaning_of_life#Western_philosophical_perspectives.

achieve biological perfection and live as long as possible. This is often set as an individual pursuit, and yet it must also be a corporate one, as no one person could ever do that by himself. Another corporate equivalent is [utilitarianism](#) which says that whatever brings the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people is the meaning of life.



Charles Allan Gilbert's *All is Vanity*, depicts a young woman amidst her makeup and perfumes, preoccupied with her own beauty at the mirror of her vanity. But all is positioned in such a way as to make the image of a skull appear, expressing that no matter how good she looks, it won't last, as death is inevitable.

On the other end of the spectrum are [nihilists](#). Nihilists are incredibly pessimistic, believing that life is simply absurd and that seeking for value and meaning in this world is ridiculous, because there is none. This is what [Douglas Adams](#) was getting at in his *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* when after a seven-and-a-half-million-year calculation by the giant supercomputer called Deep Thought, it finally revealed at the meaning of life is "42." Ironically, nihilists end up seeking pleasure just as much as hedonists, as is borne out so often in their private lives. [Monty Python](#)

had an entire movie called "The Meaning of Life, and in it a main character carries around an envelope containing

the meaning of life. Inside it is revealed, “Well, it’s nothing very special. Uh, try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try to live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.”

Then, of course, there is religion. **Hinduism** teaches that the meaning of life is to realize the fundamental truth about yourself. **Buddhism** says it is to embrace suffering and well-being in this life. Some **Jews** believe the meaning of life is to elevate the physical world and prepare it for the world to come (the messianic era). **Mormons** say we are to gain knowledge and experience and have joy. **Islam** says it is to worship Allah and be grateful to him through love and devotion. The **Westminster Catechism** teaches it is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

Ecclesiastes 1:12-3:1 – Context and Structure

Beginning in **Ecclesiastes 1:12**, the Preacher sets his sights on answering this age-old riddle. There is a lot going on in our passage, as I’ve chosen **a rather large chunk** to do at once. While many break it up into smaller units,² properly

² Ryken, for example, takes four chapters to get through it. **Philip Graham Ryken**, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010).

speaking, **Ecc 1:12-3:1** is a single unit of thought. This is easily seen in the section/paragraph divisions in the Hebrew Text.³ Thus, many commentaries do deal with this unit all at once (although most leave out 3:1 and save it for the next section).

The passage opens similarly to the book, with the Preacher identifying himself as “**king over Israel in Jerusalem**” (1:12). As such, those who deal with these verses together have summarized them as “**The Royal Experiment**”⁴ or “**The King’s Experiment**”⁵ [both emphases mine]. What is he experimenting on? Someone else has called them “**Reflections on the Vanities of Life.**”⁶ Another has “**Qoheleth’s search for answers.**”⁷ But it isn’t just reflections and answers in general. Rather, it is “**The Teacher’s Search for Meaning**” [emphasis mine],⁸ or “**Wisdom’s Failure to Discover Life’s**

³ The text marks the end of a section with ׀ or a ׃. In this case, a ׃ comes after 1:11. No other break mark occurs until the ׀ at 3:1.

⁴ **James L. Crenshaw**, *Ecclesiastes: A Commentary*, ed. Peter Ackroyd et al., First edition, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1987), 68.

⁵ **Douglas B. Miller**, *Ecclesiastes*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, PA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2010), 49.

⁶ **David Holder**, “The Structure of Ecclesiastes,” *The 2003 SITS Conference: 1-23*, <http://sitsconference.com/resources/Archives/2003---Ecclesiastes/02---Structure-Of-Ecclesiastes-Holder.pdf>.

⁷ **Graham S. Ogden** and Lynell Zogbo, *A Handbook on Ecclesiastes*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 38.

⁸ **Sidney Greidanus**, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 49.

Meaning.”⁹ Sidney Greidanus rightly concludes therefore that, “This is an ideal passage for exploring the contemporary concern for the meaning of life.”¹⁰

The entire section is “autobiographical.”¹¹ It takes us through a series of historical quests. These quests are marked by phrases such as “I applied my heart to seek and to search” (1:13); “I applied my heart to know” (17), “I said in my heart, ‘Come now’” (2:1); and so on. I divide the quests this way:

1. The quest, using wisdom, to find out all that is done under heaven (1:13-18)
2. The quest to test pleasure (2:1-11)
3. The quest to test wisdom and folly (12-16)

These quests lead to a very negative conclusion about life (17), which in turn becomes the central thought of the passage and the thought that began the book, “For all is vanity and a striving after wind” (17b). The three quests then lead to a series of inverse parallel reflections. They begin with a negative reflection about toil that reflects the negative

⁹ For example, Admin, “Ecclesiastes,” *Chiasmexchange.com* (April 28, 2018), <https://www.chiasmexchange.com/2018/04/28/ecclesiastes-1-12/>.

¹⁰ Greidanus, 49.

¹¹ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 61.

assessment of life (18a). This turns into a series of **reverse reflections** on the three quests:

1. Reflection on wisdom and folly (18b-21)
2. Reflection on pleasure, and the summary of his advice (22-25)
3. Reflection on life (26)

Put together, these create the following structure with the book parallel coming at 7:15-10:19 [see Admin chiasm in bibliography]:

- A. Intro. Preacher is king over Israel (1:12)
- B. “Wisdom” “striving after wind” (13-18)
- C. “pleasure” “enjoy” “laughter” “wine” (2:1-3)
- D. “made” “bought” “gathered” “all that my hands had done” “toil” “striving” (4-11)
- E. “What can the man do who comes after the king” “wisdom” “folly” “fool” (12-15)
- F. “So I hated life” “under the sun” (17a)
- G. “For all is vanity and a striving after wind” (17b)**
- F’. “I hated all my toil” “under the sun” (18a)
- E’. “the man who will come after me” “wisdom” “fool” (18b-21)
- D’. “toil” “striving” “not rest” (22-23)
- C’. “eat and drink” “enjoyment” (24-25)
- B’. “Wisdom” “striving after wind” (26)
- A’. Conclusion. For everything there is a season (3:1)¹²

¹² See the color-coded text in Appendix 1. See also **Christine Miller**, “Ecclesiastes 1 and 2,” *A Little Perspective* (July 12, 2016), <https://www.alittleperspective.com/ecclesiastes-1-and-2/>;

The Quest for the Meaning of Life

The Quest of Knowledge

If you set out on a quest for the meaning of life, you might as well set your sights as high as you can. This is what the Preacher does. “And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom *all that is done under heaven*” (Ecc 1:13). Ryken summarizes this well, “He wanted to understand life—not just one part of life but life taken as a whole. His quest was as extensive as it was intensive. The Preacher was an ancient-day Renaissance man. He wanted to know as much as he could about as many things as he could. He wanted to take it all in, leaving nothing out, so that his conclusions would be as definitive as possible.”¹³

Those who really want to do this do it with *all of their being*, as did the Preacher. The NAS translates “heart” as “mind.” The word (*lev*) refers to the inner man, the core of who you are. **Mind** conveys intelligence and reason. **Heart** conveys emotions and passions. **Will** conveys determination and resolve. The word encapsulates all of these!

Miller, 226. For the larger section 1:3-3:15 see William Sailer et al., *Religious and Theological Abstracts* (Myerstown, PA: Religious and Theological Abstracts, 2012).

¹³ Ryken, 37.

But even given the sincerity, this task would be very difficult to carry out, were he not a king. But as king, **he has many resources at his disposal**. The most important of these is something most world leaders have never had: **wisdom**. This word is epitomized by no one in the OT better than king Solomon. When Solomon had been newly ordained as king, God appeared to him and, almost like a genie said, “**Ask what I shall give you**” (**2Chr 1:7**). Solomon asked only for one thing: **wisdom** (*chokmah*) (**10**). He wanted wisdom and knowledge to learn how to govern the vast numbers of Israelites who were under his authority.

What is wisdom? Ryken says that wisdom in Ecclesiastes “**refers to what human beings can learn about the world without any special revelation from God.**”¹⁴ I feel the force of this, because his searching out the meaning of life is for the most part taken up with secular and mundane pursuits. Nevertheless, I think there is more going on here. Prior to this story found in Kings and Chronicles, the word appears only a very few times. In **Deuteronomy 4:6** wisdom is **keeping God’s law**. In **34:9** it is the quality given to Joshua **to rule the people** after Moses. In **2Sam 14:20** we find its first association with Christ. “**But my lord has wisdom like the**

¹⁴ Ryken, 38.

wisdom of the Angel of God to know all things that are on the earth.” You can hear in these last two how closely those are identified with king Solomon. In Proverbs, Wisdom is the wise woman who harkens to a son to listen and heed her voice. In this way, it is a step beyond knowledge, it is knowing how to apply knowledge to life.

And yet, it is even more than this. It is summarized best in verses like **Prov 9:10**, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.*” Now, it can seem that the Preacher doesn’t really fear God at all in the book, given how many sins he engages in. Nevertheless, he clearly has God in mind in its very first use. “*And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with*” (**Ecc 1:13**). Indeed, as he saw how unhappy all this toil actually is, sin or not, it was his driving wisdom that brought him to the end of the book where he says that fearing God is the conclusion of the matter. So I don’t think the Preacher is merely making use of secular wisdom the way Plato or Nietzsche might.

Plato could not do this. Wisdom is a quality that both knows and fears the Creator God, including God the

Father whom a son makes glad by loving wisdom (29:3), the **Son** who is wisdom incarnate (**Prov 8:30; Col 2:3**), and the **Holy Spirit** who is the Spirit of Wisdom (**Isa 11:2; Eph 1:17**). This makes it ironic that so many non-Christians love Ecclesiastes, for in not knowing and trusting God, they miss the most fundamental point of book. If you want to truly understand the meaning of life, it is impossible to do so without wisdom and, biblically speaking, you cannot have wisdom unless you know and fear God through his Son. I encourage you to call out to him and learn what wisdom is, for we live in a foolish and dark age and without wisdom, you will be lost. Indeed, without it, you will be lost in Ecclesiastes.

Our age is *in this respect* identical to all others. As we just saw, the Preacher continues, “**It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with**” (**Ecc 1:13b**). **What is this business?** Searching out the meaning of life by looking into all that is done under heaven. Why is it unhappy? “**I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind**” (14). This is how the Preacher began his sermon. He doesn’t want us to forget that seeking out the meaning of life is like trying to **chase the wind**. Chasing after the wind would make

anyone **unhappy**, for it is impossible to ever catch. And yet, “unhappy” is a rather odd translation for the word *ra*’ which usually means “evil,” hence the LXX has “an evil trouble.” This is an evil or disastrous business!

His gloom turns more specific. “**What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted**” (15). This refers to all kinds of things, be they **moral evil, natural disasters**, or just regular old life that gets mixed up and crooked and bent through conflicts, mistakes, moral failings, financial trouble, physical disability, and so on. Everyone has something, probably many things that they wish could be straightened out. The Preacher says life is full of things that can’t be. There are so many things like this they cannot be counted. Get used to it! This certainly qualifies as an evil trouble to try and figure out.

The Preacher’s **investigations** into the four corners of the world, going to the farthest reaches of various cultures, plumbing the deepest recesses of knowledge were all guided by wisdom. “**I said in my heart, ‘I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge**” (16). No one has ever had more, as the many

extra-biblical stories about Solomon's esoteric and almost Babylonian quest for knowledge teach us.

So he wanted to learn **the difference between wisdom and folly**. “**And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly**” (17). What makes fools tick? Why causes a person to go insane? Why do so many people do so many stupid things? What is the meaning of these things? As he looked into this, “**I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.**” And with such striving he learned, “**For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases grief**” (18), or as the NIV puts it, “**The more knowledge, the more grief.**” The more you know, the more you begin to realize you wish you didn't know it.

It has become increasingly popular in the last couple of years for people to want to know what's actually going on in this world. **Conspiracies** that have been bantered around for decades and generations are now making their way to the surface of the popular imagination. Many of those conspiracies are treated, by those who perpetrate them, as **conspiracy theories**, which has become a kind of four-letter word. They do this to hide and mask their crimes. Nevertheless, it is a powerful trope: Anyone engaging in those must be a “mad fool.” Folly! And yet, they persist and grow. And

when you take a deep dive into the very worst of them, you quickly begin to realize that there is an evil out there that is so much darker and sinister and powerful than you ever possibly imagined, that you often wish you didn't know it. What can you possibly do in the face of them? **Better to live in ignorant bliss** that with the grief that accompanies such knowledge. And yet, the temptation is still to want others to know it! That's chasing after the wind.

It isn't that such knowledge is unhelpful in any respect. It very much can be. Primarily, it can be used to help people. But it can also be **a tremendous burden**. Worse, if it is only being pursued for its own sake, like some kind of mind-game, if it is what you do with all your time, then this can become **your meaning to life**. This is like Plato seeking to find the highest knowledge, which is in some ways a close handmaiden to this topic, since both of those are rather underground subjects. Basically, what Solomon is saying about his quest is that to try and attain knowledge for knowledge's sake is a dead end, no matter what kind it is. That which the Greeks wanted to make the meaning of life itself, isn't. This was not able to help the Preacher come to a conclusion. Rather, all it did was increase his frustration, generating vexation and sorrow.

The Quest of Pleasure

Having given up the pursuit for knowledge, he turns his attention to pleasure. It is interesting how these mirror the popular answers to this question that are still around today. We saw earlier how so many people think of this as the meaning of life. “I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself’” (Ecc 2:1). We are in a culture that has taken this quest to the absolute farthest possible place. It is literally all the West now does. Recreation, sports, games, entertainment, theater, movies, tv, sex, drugs, rock n’ roll, escapism from reality. Bono and Johnny Cash explore this in the song “The Wanderer,” which Bono said was inspired by Ecclesiastes. “In its lyrics a man ventures out into a world that is part apocalyptic, part consumerist: the cities are soulless ‘capitals of tin’ with streets of gold, the sky above them atomic. The protagonist—the wanderer—goes out ‘in search of experience,’ hoping to taste everything a man can ‘before he repents.’”¹⁵

But I don’t think we are just experimenting like the preacher did who was “testing” this to see what it would

¹⁵ U2, “The Wanderer,” as sung with Johnny Cash on *Zooropa* (Island Records, 1993). The quote is from Sonya Bilocerkowycz, “When Johnny Cash Wandered with U2,” Partisan (Jan 28, 2016), <http://www.partisanmagazine.com/blog/2016/1/22/wanderer>.

produce. We are in full-on addiction mode. And I many don't care a whit to even think about **repenting**. Not yet at least. I pray to God that will come when things get bad enough. But what has it gotten us? The same thing he summarizes before going into the details, “**But behold, this also was vanity.**”

He sets his sights on many **specific kinds of pleasure**. “**I said of laughter, ‘It is mad,’ and of pleasure, ‘What use is it?’**” (**Ecc 2:2**). By “mad” he is not saying that people who laugh are insane. Some think he is talking about the kind of laughter that jokes at other people's expense.¹⁶ It is more probable that this is the kind of laughter that a fool engages in, sometimes at other's expense, but sometimes to mask their own grief and sorrow (see **Prov 14:13**). Longman says, “**Proverbs frequently pictures fools laughing on the road to destruction (10:23; 26:19; 29:9). Nonetheless, the wise, and even Lady Wisdom herself, laugh (1:26; 8:30, 31; 31:25). The difference between the fool and the wise person in Proverbs is the timing of their laughter and its object. While Qohelet recognizes that there is an appropriate time for laughter (Eccles. 3:4), he also notes that the wise person cannot discern the times**

¹⁶ **Derek Kidner**, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), p. 31; **Ryken**, 47.

(see 8:8; 9:11, 12; 10:14). So here in 2:2, as well as 7:3, 6, and 10:19, Qohelet denigrates laughter.”¹⁷

He turns from laughter to alcohol, testing it with wisdom. “I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine-- my heart still guiding me with wisdom-- and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life” (Ecc 12:3). Many people drink completely apart from wisdom. They are hiding some pain they don’t want to deal with. They simply want to feel good. The Preacher set his mind to understand what the fool does with wine, but guided by wisdom. His conclusion will come after a series of other pleasures he searched out.

Vv. 4-8 takes us on a virtual tour of the Preacher’s life. The focus is on the things he “made” (vv. 4-6), things he “bought” (7), stuff he “gathered” (8). These are summarized as his work or “toil” (10). They include great works projects, houses, vineyards (4), gardens, parks, and many fruit trees (as he tries to get himself back to Eden, apparently) (5), pools to water his forest of growing trees (6), generations of male and female slaves, great possessions of flocks and herds (7), massive amounts of silver and gold, singers—both men and

¹⁷ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 88.

women, many **concubines** (8), and presumably as many other things as he could think of. He concludes, “So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem [cf. **2Chr 9:22**] ... And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil” (9a, 10).

This **biographical outline** of material possessions is probably the single best reason to believe that Solomon wrote the book. Solomon had more **chariots**, horsemen, and ships than he knew what to do with. One **fleet** alone would be gone for three years and travel to the most exotic places in the world, bringing back much gold and silver and ivory and apes and peacocks. We are told that he made **silver and gold** as common as stone! He had 700 wives and **300 concubines**. He spent thirteen years building his own palace, which was full of **gardens and parks** and trees and herds and flocks of animals. Compare this to the mere seven years it took him to build the great First Temple for the LORD! He had singers and servants, so many that the queen of Sheba was astonished. Solomon had so much wine that he gave **120,000 gallons a day**(!) to the Hiram king of Tyre and his woodsmen who were cutting the timber for the temple. Indeed, this was

a man who had it all and no one before him or since has had anything close to him in all of Israel's history. Indeed, the world's richest people today do not compare, as, adjusted for inflation, some have estimated that his 25 tonnes of gold amassed each year would be worth over **\$2 trillion** in today's money.¹⁸

Ecclesiastes 2		Solomon in Kings, Chronicles, Song of Solomon	
(3)	Wine	Golden drinking vessels wine	(1Kg 10:21) (2Chr 2:10)
(4)	Works: houses vineyards	His royal house Vineyards	(1Kg 7:1-12) (Song 8:11)
(5)	Gardens, parks, fruit trees	Gardens	(Song 4:12-16; 5:1; 6:2)
(6)	Pools for trees	Cedar as plentiful as sycamore	(2Chr 1:15)
(7)	Slaves		(1Kg 10:4-8)
(7)	Possessions: flocks, herds	Daily royal meal: ten fat oxen, 20 pasture-fed cattle, 100 sheep, deer, gazelles, roebucks, fattened fowl	(1Kg 4:23)
(8)	Silver and gold	"Common"	(2Chr 1:15)
(8)	Singers	Singers	(2Chr 5:12-13)
(8)	Concubines	300 concubines	(1Kg 11:3)
(10)	Everything my eyes desired	1,400 chariots, 12,000 horsemen Fleet of ships: gold, silver, ivory, apes, peacocks 700 wives	(2Chr 1:14) (2Chr 9:21) (1Kg 11:3)
(9)	Great surpassing all before me		(2Chr 1:11-12)

¹⁸ "Top 10 Richest People of All Time in Human History," *Wealthresult.com*, <https://wealthresult.com/wealth/richest-people-history>.

I've always been amazed at the statement, “Also my wisdom remained with me” (Ecc 2:9b). How could a man engage in all of these activities, many of them which were or became quite sinful and yet say he was guided by wisdom? Is there really a fear of God here? I think the answer is a bit of a paradox, because it isn't wisdom that is *causing* him to sin; yet it is the pursuit of all these pleasures, some even sinful *using wisdom* that will allow him to come to the conclusion that he does at the end of our passage as well as the overall conclusion at the end of the book. Had he not been guided by wisdom, he never could have reached these conclusions. Rather, he would have been taken down by the pursuit itself, a thing which even guided by wisdom almost did bring Solomon to his own end.

But the Preacher, probably Solomon at the end of his life after God had pronounced a curse on Israel for his many disobediences, says here, “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (11). Pleasure, all the pleasures in the entire world, pleasures that only a very few on this earth can ever hope to see gained him nothing. This wasn't the meaning of life. So many people pursue the same things and they often come to realize the same truth. What do they profit a man?

The Quest of Wisdom and Folly

Having pursued knowledge and pleasure, he now returns to ideas he first mentioned in **Ecc 1:9-10** and **17**, he turns now to a different pursuit. This is a specific quest of wisdom and folly. “So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done” (**2:12**). The key literary feature is “*what can the man do who comes after the king.*” This returns in vs. **18** when he says, “*I must leave it to the man who will come after me.*”

The Preacher recognizes that *he has been pursuing foolish things*. He even said so earlier. But pursuing these foolish things *through wisdom*, an irony if ever there was one, allows him to conclude, “Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly” (**13a**). Why? Folly gave him pleasure! Wisdom gave him grief! Yet he concludes this? How? Because in the poetic parallel of the second half of the verse, *wisdom is like light* and *folly is like darkness*. “As there is more gain in light than in darkness” (**13b**). Again, “The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness” (**14a**). You can be a drunk as a skunk or as high as a kite, and what good does it do if you can’t see the door to

the bathroom to go throw up and so you knock yourself out by hitting your head against the wall in the pursuit? Those in the dark can't see where they are going. **Wisdom lets you see where you are going.**

This sounds like the Preacher is now finally ready to tell you the meaning of life. It sounds like he is going to say that pursuing wisdom is the meaning of life. But he doesn't. In fact, his next words are a cup of hot coffee spilled on your lap while driving to work.

“And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. Then I said in my heart, ‘What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?’ And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!” (14b-16). He's going to die. They are going to die. They won't be remembered. He won't be remembered. Everything gets **forgotten**. Everyone dies. It is wisdom that is allowing him to see this.

The moment he realized it, *“So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me” (17a).* This parallels **vs. 18a**, *“I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun.”* These are some of the reasons so many people think

Ecclesiastes is just a depressing book of nihilism. But this frame of these two verses is doing something. It is pointing two large arrows at the middle, which is the way he began the book. “For all is vanity and a striving after wind.” The point is, he has searched for the meaning of life and the second he thought he saw it, it vanished. The moment he thought he understood it, he forgot it. The instant he thought he knew it, it turned like a knife in his gut. His quest did not lead him to the answer. Rather, it left him empty.

Reflections on the Quest for the Meaning of Life

Reflection on Wisdom and Folly

Having come away empty handed, the Preacher begins to reflect on his three quests. He goes in reverse order. First, he thinks about the one who will come after him and whether that king will be wise or a fool. Why did he hate his toil? “I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity” (18-19).

The life of **Rehoboam**, Solomon's son and successor, epitomizes the Preacher's fears. Having taken the throne after his father, he was immediately confronted by Jeroboam who had been exiled by Solomon. Jeroboam and the people wanted to know if the son of Solomon would go easier on the people than his father. He was given good advice by the old wise men to go easier on them, but Rehoboam listened instead to the council of the young princes who told him to make life even worse for the rebels. For his **arrogant aggrandizing and obscene taunting**, Jeroboam took ten tribes with him and split the kingdom which would never be restored again. Rehoboam indeed became the inheritor of all Solomon's glory, but **he was a fool's fool** and ended up being the seed of destruction of the entire empire.

The Preacher continues, **“So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun, because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil” (20-21)**. Assuming Solomon is our Preacher, it's almost as if he **knew that his son was a fool** and as he saw the writing on the wall of both his own death and Rehoboam's soon rise to king, he was deeply grieved by all

he had done because he knew it would be squandered and soon forgotten. Indeed, in many respects **it took less than a generation**. In fact, it began almost immediately. A break-neck speed, in just his fifth year of rule, after 40 years of peace under Solomon, Shishak king of Egypt came against Jerusalem and took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and of the king. **“He took away everything” (1Kgs 14:26)**. Ecclesiastes is right. It is vanity, a chasing after wind.

Reflection on Work

The Preacher **next** begins to **reflect on his toil** and all the pleasure he sought. First, he considers all his work, all the things he accumulated and gathered around himself. **“What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity” (Ecc 2:22-23)**. The main thing that is added here is how **he could not sleep**. His work was so all-consuming that rest escaped him. How many people work the same way? They can't enjoy anything. They think about it all the time. It is a heavy burden that they wish they could get out from under.

Many, like Solomon, **work to gain more and more and more**. The monster is never satiated. And thus, they are constantly scheming and dreaming up ways to get richer, to get more stuff. Many, unlike Solomon, **must work just to eat**. They get no rest for different reasons. Work won't pay enough. They wish they had another job. Both are a terrible burden and certainly not the meaning of life.

Conclusion: Enjoy the Time You Have

Reflection on Pleasure

It is just here, at what feels like it is going to be a never-ending downer of never learning the meaning of life, that we have **a reversal**. What he says seems to be a point that might just allow for rest after all. He turns to consider how *pleasure* was a main goal of his toil. And it is here, in **vv. 24-25** and **26** that we finally get **some kind of answer**. Now, I'm not going to say that this answer *is* the meaning of life. That really doesn't come until Ch. 12. However, what he says takes us to the first of **seven "texts on joy"** in the book, the fourth of which is the center of the book:

Seven Texts on Joy in Ecclesiastes:¹⁹

- *Ecc 2:24-26*
- Ecc 3:12-13
- Ecc 3:22
- **Ecc 5:17-19**
- Ecc 8:15
- Ecc 9:7-10
- Ecc 11:7-10

The first (ours) centers on **eating and drinking**, which **parallels** the **enjoyment of wine** in **2:1-3**. “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find *enjoyment in his toil*” (**24a**). Indeed, enjoyment of life *is* one of its chief meanings. When you work, *enjoy* the fruit of your labor. If you work with your hands, take *pleasure* in how it produces the basic necessities of life, necessities which are also in and of themselves pleasurable. Since work will never be completed, take time *and rest*.

But it is just here that Qoheleth **takes this a step further**. For he is **no atheist or agnostic** and this is no mere hedonistic meaning of life. Rest must have a **spiritual** purpose, like we find with the Lord’s Day. “**This also, I saw, is from the hand of**

¹⁹ See **Monica Marie Cardona Pérez**, *A Time for Joy: A Study of the Themes of Time and Joy in the Book of Qoheleth* (Madrid: Comillas Universidad Pontificia, 2020), 10-11. <https://repositorio.comillas.edu/rest/bitstreams/424870/retrieve>.

God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” (24b-25). We have in this an ironic reversal. The first time “God” came up in Ecclesiastes was in 1:13. “It is an unhappy business that *God* has given to the children of man to be busy with.” The second time he appears in in our verse. To enjoy this unhappy business is also from God. Indeed, this is from his hand, a personification of his direct involvement in your lot in life. If you contemplate the meaninglessness of life after you are gone, if you think long and too often about work, if you are looking only to pleasure to get you through all this life, stop. Enjoy what God has given you. Whether it is a lot or very little. None of it will profit you eternally. Only trust in God himself can do that. But the bonus is, he will also allow you to enjoy the very things that are so exasperating and absurd and temporary about this life. How many people never ever find that kind of enjoyment? Too many. In Christ, it is possible.

Reflection on Understanding

We come to a concluding verse which returns us to knowledge. It also continues the theme of pleasure. “For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and

knowledge and *joy*, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who *pleases* God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind” (26). This almost would have been a wholly positive ending to my sermon, were it not for this ending.

This ending, which takes us back to vanity and striving after wind is one of seven “breath” evaluations in the chapter.²⁰ Seven is the perfect number, and so this seventh reinforces the overall thesis of the book. But you don’t want to miss the *positive point* being made here, for they feel so few and far between. True wisdom is a gift from God. That wisdom can lead to much knowledge, as vexing and wearisome as it can be. But the third component, which is also *God’s gift, is joy*.

He mentions the sinner who is contrasted with “*the one who pleases ... God [who] has given...*” Here, *the sinner is the person who refuses to enjoy God’s gifts!* Yes, it is a sin not to be joyful in the face of such burdens. “*Rejoice in the LORD always, again I say, rejoice!*” (Php 4:4). Dr. Barrick’s commentary is called *Ecclesiastes: the Philippians of the OT*.²¹ This is why. We can rejoice in the midst of the pleasure by

²⁰ 2:11, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 26. See Norbert Lohfink, *A Continental Commentary: Qoheleth* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 53 along with his translation in 20-22.

²¹ William D. Barrick, *Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament*, Focus on the Bible Series (Geanies House, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2015).

enjoying and being joyful in it as a gift. Or, we can rejoice in the midst of the vanity and frustration of all we have contemplated today. We can rejoice and be joyful in both. Derek Kidner says this contrast “is between the satisfying spiritual gifts of God (wisdom, knowledge, joy), which only those who please Him can desire or receive, and the frustrating business of amassing what cannot be kept, a business which is the chosen lot of those who reject Him.”²²

The true vanity is never enjoying this life. As we will see in the next chapter, there is a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn, and a time to dance. The Preacher has spent much time in contemplation of things that made him want to cry. Even in this last verse, there is this paradox of joy and vanity. Perhaps this is why the Hebrew text included 3:1 as part of this unit: “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven” (notice also *heaven* in 1:13).

The person who never enjoys, who only toils and gathers and works and makes and buys will eventually give it away to someone else. In this case, they must give it away to *the one who pleases God*. In the prophets and Psalms, there are many scenes of the Last Day when the kings of the earth

²² Kidner, 36.

must come into God's presence and give him all that they have as a gift to the Son of God. "Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession" (Isa 60:11). Revelation ends on this note (Rev 21:25-26).

God gives to those with ears to hear, **wisdom to enjoy his gifts now**. This enjoyment itself is the gift of God. Therefore, surely the *Westminster Catechism* was on the tracking with Qoheleth when it concluded that the meaning of life is, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." The Preacher says you may do that not only in formal worship, but in all the things that you do. Do not be so spiritual that you are no earthly good. **Enjoy life**, for it is a gift from God. **Look at work redemptively**, even if you hate it, and you will learn to see it through God's eyes. **Enjoy your pleasures**, but do not live for them. **Enjoy the common things of life**—eating and drinking, being with friends, living on God's green earth. There is nothing better, Qoheleth says. There is nothing better. Do so now, today, for tomorrow you may no longer be here. And that would surely be a great vanity.

APPENDIX 1: Ecclesiastes 1:12-3:1 Colored for Matching Ideas

<p>^{1:12} I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem.</p> <p>¹³ And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.</p> <p>¹⁴ I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.</p> <p>¹⁵ What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted.</p> <p>¹⁶ I said in my heart, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge."</p> <p>¹⁷ And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.</p> <p>¹⁸ For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.</p>	<p>ESV Ecclesiastes 3:1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...</p> <p>²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind.</p>
<p>ESV Ecclesiastes 2:1 I said in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity.</p> <p>² I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?"</p> <p>³ I searched with my heart how to cheer my body with wine-- my heart still guiding me with wisdom-- and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.</p>	<p>²⁴ There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,</p> <p>²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?</p>
<p>⁴ I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.</p> <p>⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees.</p> <p>⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees.</p> <p>⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem.</p> <p>⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man.</p> <p>⁹ So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me.</p> <p>¹⁰ And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil.</p> <p>¹¹ Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.</p>	<p>²² What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?</p> <p>²³ For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.</p>
<p>¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.</p> <p>¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness.</p> <p>¹⁴ The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them.</p> <p>¹⁵ Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity.</p> <p>¹⁶ For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool!</p>	<p>seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me,</p> <p>¹⁹ and who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.</p> <p>²⁰ So I turned about and gave my heart up to despair over all the toil of my labors under the sun,</p> <p>²¹ because sometimes a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave everything to be enjoyed by someone who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil.</p>
<p>^{17a} So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me,</p>	<p>¹⁸ I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun,</p>
<p>^{17b} for all is vanity and a striving after wind.</p>	

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